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ABSTRACT

Austin Independent School District's (AISD's) elementary promotion/retention policy is designed to promote the full development of learners' potential and accommodate individual needs. It requires that all those at least one year behind in reading basals (grades 1-6) or math competencies (grades 4-6) be considered for retention. AISD tries to help retainees and potential retainees through summer school, inservice training for teachers, Project PASS (designed to improve Black students' achievement), and other programs. The retention rate doubled after publication of the new policy in 1981, but has declined since then. Retainees' success was judged by the opinions of parents, the opinions of teachers, and gains in reading scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. At least two of the three sources agreed that the student was a success as a retainee in 79 percent of the 121 cases. Only four percent were considered unsuccessful by all three sources. (BW)

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FINAL REPORT

Project Title: Promotion and Retention

Contact Person: Nancy Schuyler, Glynn Ligon

Major Positive Findings

1. Retention was considered successful by 71% of the parents and 79% of the teachers of a sample of students repeating a grade in 1983-84. About half (54%) of these students were successful based on ITBS reading scores.

2. A number of efforts to help retainees and potential retainees have been implemented at the district and school levels, including:

   - A summer school for retainees and potential retainees;
   - Videotapes on working with retainees;
   - Project PLUS (in two schools) for first graders at high risk of being retained;
   - Project PASS (in 18 paired schools) to improve Black achievement and reduce retention rates;
   - Individual school efforts to place retainees properly, meet their special needs, monitor their progress, and keep parents informed.

3. On the average, retainees' reading gains improved from .6 during the year before retention to .8 of a year during the year repeated. However, growth declined to .7 of a year once students were promoted.

Major Findings Requiring Action

1. Retention was not viewed as successful by 29% of the parents and 21% of the teachers of a sample of students who repeated the 1983-84 school year. ITBS reading scores indicated 46% of these retainees made poor academic progress.

2. The new Texas Education Code 21.101 requires revision of AISD's retention and promotion policy in 1984-85.

3. On the average, retainees' growth in math drops from about .8 of a year before retention to .6 of a year during the year repeated. Growth increases back to .8 of a year once students are promoted and presented with new material. Only 37% of those repeating 1983-84 gained at least .8 of a year (the national average for low achievers) in math while retained.

PROMOTION OR RETENTION: AN INDIVIDUAL DECISION

The difficult decision of whether to promote or retain students who are performing below grade level must be made on an individual basis. In evaluating the impact of retention this year, we attempted to determine success on an individual basis as well. This report will address the following questions:

- What is the Austin Independent School District's (AISD) promotion/retention policy at the elementary level?
- Who is retained?
- Is the policy being followed?
- What impact does retention have on students?
- Does AISD's promotion/retention policy need revision?

WHAT IS AISD's ELEMENTARY PROMOTION/RETENTION POLICY?

Austin ISD's promotion/retention policy is designed to promote the full development of learners' potential and accommodate individual needs. A new policy was adopted in April, 1981 and officially put into effect during the 1981-82 school year. The new policy is more specific than the old in several ways. It specifies that:

- Students who are at least one year behind in reading basals at grades one through six and/or one year behind in mastering math competencies at grades four through six should be considered for retention. Other factors such as age, language, physical development, social maturity, behavior, and absence rate should then also be considered in making retention decisions.
- In general, students should be retained no more than once in grades K-3 and once in 4-6.
- Teachers and principals have the final responsibility for retention decisions, and steps are detailed to be taken in the retention process. Parents are to be notified as early as possible (at least two months before the end of the school year) that retention is a possibility. Teachers must confer with the parents and help them see the positive aspects of retention. Teachers are also to prepare instuctional information for the students' next teachers. The fall teachers then must make sure students' learning needs are considered and that they do not simply repeat the same material in the same way again.

Efforts to Help Retainees

AISD is trying to help elementary retainees and potential retainees in a number of ways.

Districtwide efforts include:

- A five-week summer school for retainees and potential retainees offering reading and math instruction;
- Videotapes for teachers describing diagnosis of retainees' needs, work on self-concept, use of direct instruction, and parent-teacher conferences; and
- Project PASS (in 18 paired schools), designed to improve Black students' achievement and decrease retention, special education assignments, and discipline rates.

All of the schools have undertaken efforts to help retainees. However, two efforts focus specifically on preventing retention in high-risk first graders.

- PLUS, a Chapter 2 program, has been in operation at Govalle and Sunset Valley this year. Additional reading and math instruction is provided by a special teacher to about 20 low achievers considered at risk for retention at each school.
- At Metz elementary, one teacher provides an alternative type of language arts and reading instruction (at the kindergarten/first grade transition level) to about 20 high-risk students.

Schools have reported a variety of efforts to:

- Assure proper placement for retainees,
- Provide staff development in how to best meet retainees' needs,
- Monitor retainees' progress throughout the year,
- Provide special help for retainees,
- Use special approaches with retainees, and
- Communicate with parents.

Teachers and administrators were asked about possible additional ways to help retainees or potential retainees.

- About 60% of the teachers surveyed thought remedial, after-school classes in math and reading would help reduce the number of retentions.
- Only one third of the administrators believed this would help.

Teachers were asked which of several options would be most helpful to them in assisting retainees.

- 60% chose having a helping teacher in the classroom to enable more small-group and individual attention as the best option. This would be very expensive.
- About 15% chose either training parents to help their children at home or training teachers in the use of instructional alternatives that work with retainees.
- Only 3% to 5% chose training in understanding retainees needs and feelings, or more supplemental materials, as the most helpful option.

The percentage of teachers who believed they were adequately prepared to meet the needs of retainees increased from 40% in 1982-83 to 48% in 1983-84.

WHO IS RETAINED?

Retention rates:

- Nearly doubled after publication of the new policy in spring, 1981.
- Increased even more after the new policy was officially put into effect during the 1991-82 school year.
- Have declined since 1981-82. This spring's rate is higher than last year's but lower than that for 1980-81 and 1981-82.

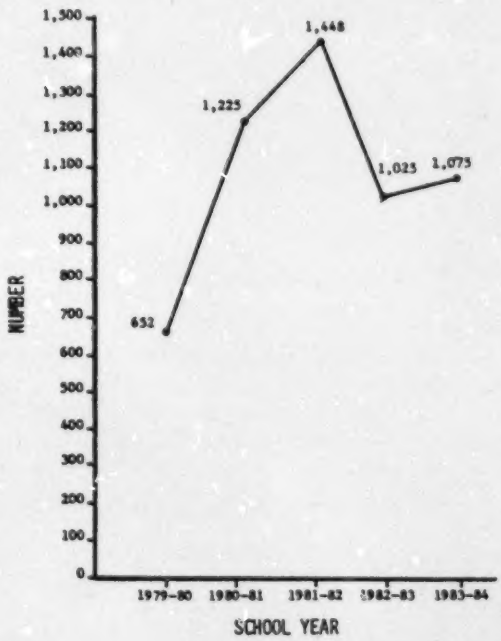


Figure 1. NUMBER OF STUDENTS RECOMMENDED FOR RETENTION IN AISD OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS. Students recommended for retention in the spring of each year.

Over half of all retainees are first graders. Rates then decline through sixth grade. Kindergarten retention rates are also low. Across all elementary grades, 3.5% of those enrolled were retained this spring.

SPRING, 1984 RECOMMENDED RETAINEES				
GRADE	NUMBER RETAINED	PERCENT OF RETAINEES AT EACH GRADE LEVEL	ENROLLMENT	PERCENT OF THOSE ENROLLED WHO ARE RETAINED
K	63	5.9%	4,234	1.5%
1	586	54.5%	5,012	11.7%
2	180	16.7%	4,377	4.1%
3	85	7.9%	4,369	1.9%
4	74	6.9%	4,120	1.8%
5	51	4.7%	4,170	1.2%
6	36	3.4%	4,204	.9%
TOTAL	1,075	100.0%	30,486	3.5%

Figure 2. SPRING, 1984 RETENTION RATE BY GRADE. Shows the percent of retainees at each grade level plus the percent of students enrolled at each grade level who are retained. Enrollment based on average daily membership for 1983-84.

The 1983-84 retention rates by ethnicity reveal that:

- Nearly half of the retainees are Hispanic (47%);
- About one fourth are Anglo (28%) and Black (23%);
- Small percentages are Asian (2%) and American Indian (.6%).

The percentage of retainees who are Black has dropped slightly since 1981-82 (from 29% to 22%); the percentage who are Anglo has increased slightly (from 22% to 27%).

In terms of enrollment, 5.6% of the American Indian, 5.2% of the Hispanic, 4.0% of the Black, 3.5% of the Asian, and 1.9% of the Anglo students in AISD were retained in the spring of 1983-84.

Year	American Indian %	Black %	Asian %	Hispanic %	Anglo %	Total %
1979-80	.3	19	2	45	34	100
1980-81	0	28	1	47	24	100
1981-82	.6	29	1	47	22	100
1982-83	1.0	23	3	47	26	100
1983-84	.6	23	2	47	28	100

Figure 3. RETENTION RATE BY ETHNICITY: 1979-80 THROUGH 1983-84. Shows percentage of those recommended for retention at the end of each year of each ethnic group.

Of those retained in the spring of 1983-84, 178 (17%) have limited English proficiency.

There is considerable overlap between special education and retention. A number of students are served by special education and retention concurrently or in consecutive years. For example:

- 264 (26%) of the 1,023 students repeating a grade in 1982-83 were served by special education in 1983-84.
- 181 students served by special education in 1983-84 are being recommended for retention in 1984-85 (16% of the 1,126 recommended retainees).

Retention rates vary across schools. In 1983-84, the number retained varied from 0 to 65; the percent retained ranged from 0% to 12.4%. Between 1982-83 and 1983-84, retention rates increased for 35 schools, decreased for 23, and stayed the same for 3.

IS AISD'S RETENTION POLICY BEING FOLLOWED?

ITBS Scores of Those Retained

The retention policy states that all those at least one year behind in reading basals at grades one through six or in math competencies at grades four through six are to be considered for retention. Other factors, including achievement test scores, should then be considered in making the final retention decision. While Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) scores are not correlated exactly with daily performance in class, but they should reflect classroom performance in a general way. In an effort to see whether those who repeated the 1983-84 school year were one year behind in reading and/or math when the retention decision was made in spring, 1983, 1982-83 ITBS scores were reviewed.

Grade	1983-84 Retainees	One Year Below Grade Level Number	%
1	362	103	28.5
2	117	65	55.6
3	52	29	55.8
4	63	44	69.8
5	38	30	78.9
6	22	18	81.8
TOTAL	654	289	44.2

Figure 4. PERCENTAGE OF THOSE REPEATING A GRADE IN 1983-84 WHO WERE AT LEAST ONE YEAR BELOW GRADE LEVEL IN READING ON THE ITBS WHEN RECOMMENDED FOR RETENTION. Includes all those with scores available for 1982-83 and 1983-84.

As Figure 4 illustrates:

- Overall, 44% of those retained in 1983-84 scored at least one year below grade level when the retention decision was made.
- The percentage of those scoring at least one year below grade level in reading is higher in the intermediate grades than in the primary grades; the percentage increases from 29% of the first-grade retainees to 82% of the sixth-grade retainees.

A small percentage (5% of those retained) actually had Reading Total ITBS scores at or above grade level when they were recommended for retention.

Performance in math is only considered at grades four through six in making retention decisions.

- Most (75-83%) of those repeating grades four through six in 1983-84 did score at least one year below grade level when retained.
- Small percentages (16-29%) of those repeating 1983-84 at grades one through three scored at least one year below grade level in math.

Grade	1982-83 Retainess	One Year Below Grade Level Number	Percent
1	384	60	15.6%
2	118	22	18.6%
3	49	14	28.6%
4	66	50	75.8%
5	40	30	75.0%
6	23	19	82.6%
TOTAL	680	195	28.7%

Figure 5. PERCENTAGE OF THOSE REPEATING A GRADE IN 1983-84 WHO SCORED AT LEAST ONE YEAR BELOW GRADE LEVEL IN MATH ON THE ITBS WHEN RECOMMENDED FOR RETENTION.

About 10% of those retained actually scored at or above grade level in math (primarily first through third graders).

Thus, a majority of students, at least in reading, are not as far behind as the guidelines suggest they should be when they are retained. This is true particularly at the primary grades. While we do not know for sure how many students are retained that do not meet policy guidelines (because students can be retained for poor performance in either reading or math and because ITBS scores do not precisely represent classroom performance), these findings have some implications for AISD's retention

policy. They raise the questions:

1) Who really should be retained? Should guidelines be revised?

2) Should policy implementation be monitored more closely?

3) Can students who are behind in only reading or math when retained be properly challenged in other areas?

4) Should students (especially first graders) who are immature but achieve close to grade level be retained?

All of these questions will be important to consider in reviewing AISD's promotion/retention policy in light of the new Texas Education Code 21.101.

High and Low Retention-Rate Schools

A look at the number retained in relation to the number of low achievers at each school revealed that schools serving similar populations retain students at very different rates. This does not really violate the policy because achievement is only one factor to consider in making retention decisions. However, it does indicate that the policy allows for considerable variation in rates based on different principal and teacher philosophies.

A comparison of ITBS reading and math achievement of retainees in schools with high and low retention rates revealed little difference in achievement gains.

These results were somewhat surprising. Previous national and local retention research had suggested that low achievers might be better off promoted than retained, so low retention rates seemed desirable.

WHAT IMPACT DOES RETENTION HAVE ON STUDENTS?

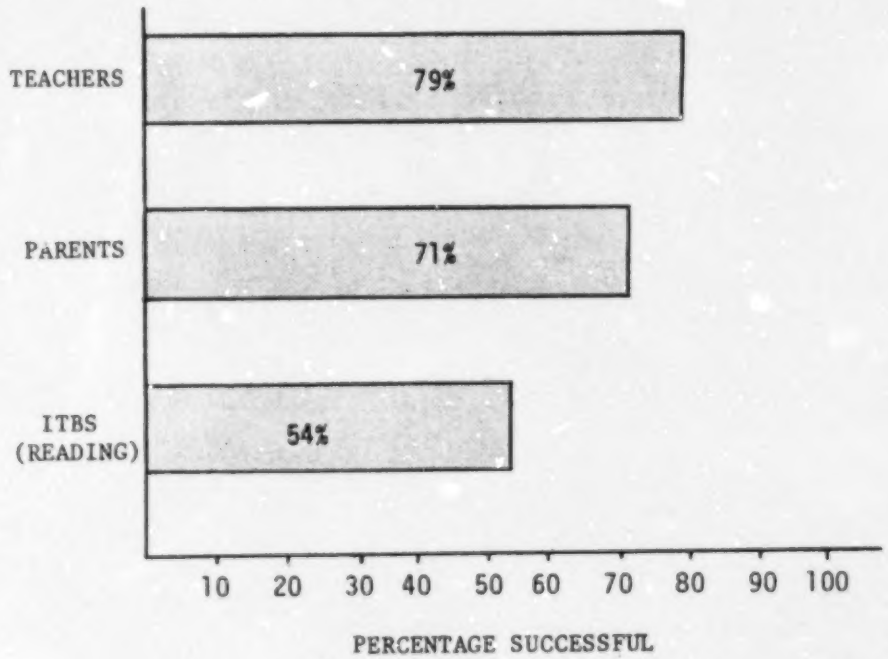
Because retention decisions must be made on a case by case basis, we tried to assess the success of retention on an individual basis this year. Although information on average gains does provide important information on retention's overall effects and on trends across years, we hope this individual approach provides a better view of how retention affects individual students.

The Success Study

A random sample of 251 students who repeated a grade in the 1983-84 school year was selected for the success study. Retainees' success was judged by:

- The opinions of parents,
- The opinions of teachers,
- ITBS Reading Total gains of .8 grade equivalent (GE) years or more while retained (the national average for low achievers).

Of the original sample, 128 parents (51%) and 251 teachers (96%) returned completed surveys. Overall success was examined for the 121 retainees for whom both surveys and ITBS Reading Total scores for 1982-83 and 1983-84 were available. As illustrated below, 79% of the teachers and 71% of the parents thought retainees had been successful (based on the items rating overall success). These 121 students were successful based on ITBS reading scores in 54% of the cases.



The number of information sources indicating that these retainees were successful is shown below.

Sources Showing Success	Number of Cases	Percentage
3 out of 3	35	29%
2 out of 3	60	50%
1 out of 3	21	17%
0 out of 3	5	4%
Total Cases	121	100%

Figure 6. RETAINEE SUCCESS. Based on parent and teacher opinion and ITBS reading gains of eight grade-equivalent months or more in a one-year period.

These results show that:

- All three sources agreed the child had been successful as a retainee in 29% of the cases (35 of 121).
- At least two of the three sources agreed that the student was a success as a retainee in 79% (95 of 121) of the cases.
- Only one source thought the child was successful as a retainee in 17% (21 of 121) of the cases.
- All three information sources indicated that 4% of the students (5 of 121) were unsuccessful as retainees.

The success study results also indicated that:

- In 58% of the cases, parents and teachers agreed the child had been successful. However, the ITBS showed success for only half of these cases.
- In 25% of the cases, the ITBS showed success but at least one other source did not.

The success of the 54 first graders in the sample was examined separately with very similar results. All three sources agreed the child was successful as a retainee in 28% of the cases; 2 of 3 sources agreed in 83% of the cases. Only one source indicated success in 17% of the cases.

Although not asked about individual retainees, administrators were asked two general questions related to this topic on the 1983-84 districtwide administrator survey.

FOR HOW MANY OF YOUR SCHOOL'S RETAINEES WAS RETENTION THE CORRECT DECISION? (N=26)

31% ALL	46% MOST	8% HALF	12% FEW	4% NONE

- One third of the elementary campus administrators said retention was the correct decision for all of their retainees.
- About three fourths believed it was the right thing to do for most or all of their retainees.
- About one fourth contended that retention was the correct decision for half or fewer of their retainees.

TOO MANY STUDENTS ARE RETAINED WITH THE ELEMENTARY RETENTION POLICY. (N=45)					
Stongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
18%	38%	10%	16%	4%	13%

- Most administrators (56%) did not believe too many students are retained with the elementary retention policy.
- A total of 20% contended that too many students were retained under the policy. Another 23% were not sure.

Achievement Growth of Retainees

The amount of growth shown by individual retainees varies widely, from actual losses in grade equivalent scores to gains of over two years. While extreme cases may represent invalid test scores in either 1983 or 1984, the range clearly illustrates that some students show good gains while retained; others do not.

As noted earlier, low achievers nationwide gain an average of .8 of a GE year per year of instruction. Based on all those repeating a grade in AISD during 1983-84 with test scores:

- About half (52%) gained .8 of a GE year or more in reading.
- 37% gained .8 of a GE year or more in math.

Average one-year gains for those repeating a grade in 1983-84 are shown below.

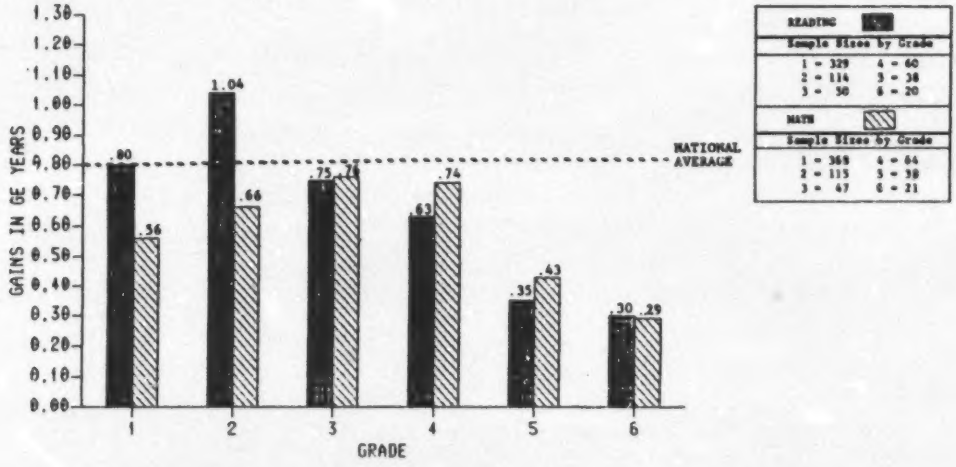


Figure 9. MEDIAN ITBS GAINS FOR THOSE REPEATING A GRADE IN 1983-84. Gains in Reading Total and Math Total scores between spring, 1983 and spring, 1984 for all those tested both years at grades 1-6. A total of 611 students are included for reading; 653 for math.

Average one-year reading gains for those repeating 1983-84:

- Are greatest for second graders,
- Decrease across grades past grade 2.

Average one-year math gains:

- Are greatest for third and fourth graders,
- Are smaller than reading gains at grades 1 and 2.

Average growth in both reading and math was lowest for the small number of students retained at grades five and six.

There have been some changes in growth rates since the new retention policy was published in spring of 1981 and put into effect during the 1981-82 school year. Those repeating 1982-83 were the first to be retained under the new policy. Figure 10 illustrates trends before and after implementation of the new policy.

GRADE	1980-81	1981-82	1982-83	1983-84
	READING			
1	.79	.83	.85	.78
2	.84	.75	1.02	1.05
3	.78	.82	.82	.68
4	.73	.74	.75	.67
5	.78	.84	.84	.40
6	.92	.72	.55	.52
	MATH			
1	.60	.63	.65	.59
2	.52	.47	.64	.66
3	.61	.74	.81	.68
4	.51	.57	.51	.82
5	.55	.64	.72	.54
6	.80	.91	.64	.39

Figure 10. ONE-YEAR MEAN GAINS IN READING AND MATH ON THE ITBS FOR THOSE REPEATING 1980-81, 1981-82, 1982-83, AND 1983-84. Shows mean GE gains for year repeated.

- First-grade gains have remained about the same (about .8 of a GE year in reading and .6 of a GE year in math).
- Second-grade gains have improved in both reading and math the last two years under the new policy.
- Third-grade gains have declined slightly this year in both reading and math.
- Fourth-grade gains declined slightly in reading this year but improved .3 of a GE year in math.
- Fifth-grade gains are lower than last year's in both reading and math.
- Sixth-grade reading and math gains have been lower the last two years under the new policy.

Patterns of Growth. Following the achievement of one group of retainees before, during, and after retention provides valuable information about its effects.

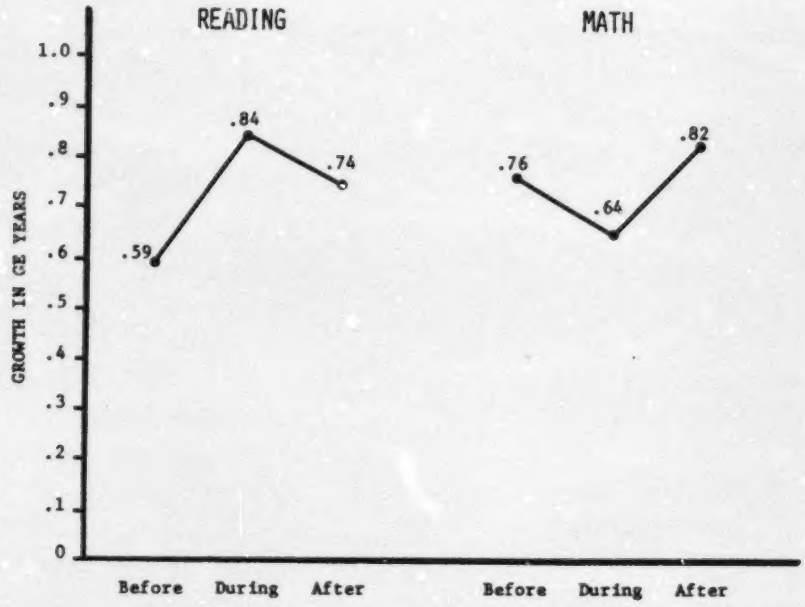


Figure 11. AVERAGE GROWTH PATTERNS FOR THOSE REPEATING A GRADE IN 1982-83 BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER RETENTION. Sample included 396 students with Reading Total and 414 students with Math Total ITBS scores for the last four years.

As Figure 11 illustrates:

- Retainees' reading gains improved during the year repeated but then declined once the students were promoted.
- Retainees' math gains decreased during the retention year but increased once students were promoted.

The reading pattern suggests that students were doing poorly in reading when they were retained and that retention did improve this growth rate. However, growth slowed somewhat once students were promoted and no longer identified as students with special needs. Students may not have been able to handle the more difficult material well.

In math, retainees were not as far behind when recommended for retention. The fact that growth rates slow during retention and increase with promotion suggests students are not sufficiently challenged with new material during the retention year.

DOES AISD'S PROMOTION/RETENTION POLICY NEED REVISION?

The new Texas Education Code 21.101 indicates that each school district must have a policy on promotion, retention, remediation, and placement based on student's mastery of the essential elements for each grade level enacted by 1985-86. The District must set appropriate mastery levels and establish procedures to reteach students not mastering each of the essential elements. Separate standards can be set for special education students.

This change in the Texas Education Code indicates that AISD's placement policy must be revised next year.

- The policy must be stated in terms of mastery of essential elements in reading rather than basals completed. Both the reading and math standards must indicate mastery of grade-level competencies rather than the previous grades' material.

- Mastery levels must be set high enough to challenge higher ability students but low enough to be within reach of lower ability students.

- A way to measure mastery of these competencies must be established (the use of current AISD test instruments is now being examined).

- Procedures for remediation of skills must be determined. All students not mastering some the competencies do not have to be retained but must be retaught. For example, reteaching during the school year or during summer school might be appropriate for those who fail to master only a few skills. Retention might be reserved for those failing to master most or all of the competencies. Retention in only one subject area might also be considered.

The way in which AISD resolves these issues could dramatically increase or conceivably decrease current retention rates. Information from ORE's study of the effects of AISD's current policy should provide valuable information in assessing alternatives. ORE's research indicates that retention is helpful for some students but not others. About three fourths of the parents and teachers of retainees believe retention was successful for their child.

- Compared to national averages for low achievers on the ITBS, only half of AISD's retainees show average gains in reading and only one third show average gains in math while retained.

- Growth in math appears to suffer during the retention year; growth in reading appears to increase during the retention year but decrease with promotion to the next grade.

Various ways to prevent retention or remediate skills in other ways should be examined closely in revising AISD's policy.

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